

In October 2018 the figures for the number of empty properties in the old Waveney area was 1094 and for the Suffolk Coastal area it was 1184. The figures for East Suffolk for October 2019 show a small reduction from 2018. Irrespective of this, the number of empty properties in the District remains a concern for the team.

There are many reasons that properties are empty: some are being renovated; some are for sale or for let; some are the subject of planning applications (or appeals) and some are in the hands of executors following the death of the owner. It is noted that the overall housing stock in the District rose by a significant amount in 2018 and with not all new properties selling immediately, this will have an impact on the numbers of empty properties.

Every year a letter is sent to the owner of every property that has been empty for 6 months or more. This provides an opportunity for owners to update the council on whether it is still empty and if so, what the intentions are for it and also for the Council to let owners know how the Council can help them to return the property to use. A review of the information provided in 2011 found that just over a quarter of the properties were being renovated, a fifth were for sale or had just been sold and nearly a third were occupied either as a permanent residence or a holiday home.

There are however many properties where the owner has no firm proposals for their future use, and it is these where the team concentrate their efforts. There are a number of ways the Council can help an owner return a property to use: house renovation grants are available for essential works; private sector leasing is available for owners who want to let but do not want to deal with the day to day management and we can help owners to sell or to let if this is their preference. The team has had great success with two very long-term properties in Felixstowe (and one further north in the District) which were sold at auction last year and are now being renovated ready for re-occupation. A further property is going to auction imminently as a result of action by the Council Tax and legal teams; this property would undoubtedly have remained empty for the foreseeable future were it not for their intervention. Reduced auction fees are available to our empty homeowners and the team will help with every stage of the process if needed, including arranging for the garden and house to be cleared if necessary.

Financial disincentives are in place for the owners of properties that have been empty longer than 2 years, with the Council Tax payable on these being 200% rising to 300% if they are still empty after 5 years. The Council can also look at other enforcement options such as compulsory purchase though this would only be looked at as a last resort.